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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of "empowerment" and analyzes contrasting perspectives on the empowerment of parents that have informed developments at national and local levels in the United Kingdom and also in the United States and other countries. Empirical data illustrate the limited impact these approaches have on a group of working-class parents in England. The first approach is exemplified by social democratic initiatives that define empowerment as a strengthening of the role of parent-as-citizen through mechanisms designed to encourage the closer involvement of parents in the planning and delivery of local education services. The second definition of empowerment is contained within the British Conservative Party's emphasis on promoting the role of the parent as consumer, especially through policies claiming to enhance parental choice of school. A third approach, supported by the "new centrists" emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to empower himself or herself by taking advantage of opportunities to participate. The experiences of a racially mixed working class group of parents and their perceptions of the forms of action open to them during a teacher shortage illustrate how little sense of power these parents had. Data collected through interviews with 50 parents, some of whom were Bangladeshi, showed how far from empowered these parents felt as the teacher shortage disrupted classes and their children's educations. The beliefs and attitudes of many parents, especially low-income and minority group members, remain untouched by the rhetoric of parent empowerment. (Contains 65 references.) (SLD)

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Parent empowerment? Collective Action and Inaction in Education

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Parent empowerment? Collective action and inaction in education in the UK.

Abstract

The aims of this paper are two-fold. First, to examine the concept of 'empowerment' in more detail, and to analyse contrasting perspectives to the 'empowerment' of parents, which have informed developments at a national and local level, primarily in the UK, but also in the USA and elsewhere. Second, to illustrate, by drawing on empirical data, the limited impact these approaches have upon a group of working class parents in London, England.

The first approach is exemplified by social democratic initiatives which define 'empowerment' as a strengthening of the role of parent-as-citizen, through mechanisms designed to encourage the closer involvement of parents in the planning and delivery of local education services. The second definition of empowerment is contained within the British Conservative Party's emphasis on promoting the role of the parent-as-consumer, especially through policies claiming to enhance parental choice of school. A third approach, supported by the 'new centrists' emphases the responsibility of the individual to empower him/herself, by taking advantage of opportunities to participate.

The first part of this paper will provide a critique of the initiatives which result from these contrasting understandings of empowerment. However, it is also important to look at how macro-political approaches are experienced locally; to examine, in other words, how discourses around 'empowerment' are understood by differently situated groups and individuals. Consequently, the second part of this paper will focus on a racially-mixed, working class group of parents and their perceptions of the forms of action open to them in a particular situation - a teacher shortage - acknowledged to have deleterious consequences for their children's education.

Parent empowerment? Collective action and inaction in education in the UK

> *I have given you more power than you have ever had or dreamed of,* Kenneth Baker, 1988, then British Secretary of State for Education to group of parents, (cited in Docking, 1990, p.79).

Introduction

A fundamental element of a liberal democratic society is generally held to be the participation of all citizens in the public sphere, of which education is a part. This paper attempts to explain why some parents remain unaffected by current discourses which claim to 'empower' them. Therefore, its main focus is **non**-participation. Whilst there are several empirical studies of parent participation and activism (Dehli with Januario 1994; Formisano 1991; Hess 1991; Beattie 1985) attempts to explain non-participation - defined here as a lack of action in response to a specific event or events[1] - is a more infrequent concern. There has been, and continues to be, much theoretical emphasis laid upon the vitality of social movements. In particular, writers commentating on 'the postmodern era' praise their creativity, their inventiveness, their radical dynamism (Young 1990; Yeatman 1994 p.114; Giddens 1994). However, this paper seeks to explore not the voices, but the silences, an absence rather than a presence.

The specific context explored here is parents perceptions of, and reactions to a situation, (that of teacher shortage), agreed to have a negative impact on their children's education. The underlying reasons for parents' inaction are sought, and the gap between parents' private understandings of the courses of action open to them and the public rhetoric of parental empowerment is highlighted.

Empowerment

During the late 1980s and 1990s the term *empowerment* emerged as a populist symbolic term. Once common currency amongst, but largely confined to, the political left, the concept is now in general and frequent use in political debate

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1. I realise that tying the defintion of parental participation to a particular event, as I have done in this paper, may suggest that the concept is limited to 'problem-fixing'. I have attempted to develop a broader understanding of participation elsewhere (see Vincent 1996). Thanks to Stephen Ball for drawing this point to my attention.

amongst all parties. Definitions vary, and are often inexplicit, but tend to centre around the notion of people taking greater control over aspects of their own lives. This combination of positive, but nebulous, connotations suggests that empowerment is often used as a 'condensation symbol'. Edelman (1964) defines such terms as critical components of political rhetoric. Condensation symbols operate by 'condensing' specific emotions into a particular word or phrase, so that its usage provokes those emotions. However, the exact meanings of the terms are not clearly defined. Indeed, they are often kept vague to attract maximum support (Fielding 1996). Over time, such words gain assumed meanings, which may alter and shift in emphasis, (see below) but which are rarely critically scrutinised. Thus their usage may obscure more than it illuminates. Other diffuse concepts possessed of a similar ability to invoke a warm glow of equality and joint endeavour include 'participation' and 'partnership'.

References to empowerment invite the questions 'empowerment for what', to what ends, with what goal in mind? The term's status as a condensation symbol means such questions tend to be overlooked. For the purposes of this paper, I want to draw one distinction with reference to the aims of parental empowerment. The phrase is often used in the context of school reform (eg Hess 1992; Wolfendale 1992). For example, commentators on the Chicago school reforms make it clear that the establishment of Local School Councils (LSCs), made up predominantly of parent representatives was a key element of the process of restructuring which aimed to improve the quality of students' educational experiences (Moore 1992). This is an instrumental view of participation (Woods 1988), and my concerns lie in a slightly different direction. In this paper parental participation is viewed as an exemplar of broader citizen-state relationships (Ranson 1986). 'Empowerment', in this sense, refers to the alteration of existing relationships between citizens and state institutions and perceptions of agency on the part of those citizens.

The identification of empowerment as a condensation symbol explains the difficulties in trying to identify a solid kernel of meaning within the concept. The value of the term as political rhetoric contributes to the looseness and vagueness with which it is employed. This characteristic imprecision can be seen to crystallise around three main points.

First, the term 'empowerment' suggests that power is a quantifiable property, which can be 'given' to a subordinate group by the original power-holders, and as a consequence lost by them. This simplistic assumption of two discrete 'blocs': the powerful and the powerless, does not acknowledge

the complexity of power relations. Power operates at many levels within society. Foucault famously claimed that it is exercised in a multiplicity of situations by individuals who employ and experience power at different points and in different relationships, with the result that power 'is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power....Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application' (Foucault 1980 p.98). This is not, however, to deny the 'unruly but patterned nature of systemic and wide scale asymmetrical power relations', (Kenway 1995 p. 45) but merely to stress the inadequacy of a simple binary opposition.

Similarly, viewing power relations as consisting of the interactions of two individuals or groups (the powerful and the powerless) also ignores the contribution of 'third-party' systems, structures and agents which mediate these interactions (Young 1990; McLaren 1988). Teacher-parent relationships therefore cannot be considered in isolation from the structures of the education system and the actions of other actors within it. This process of mediation cannot be assumed to always benefit the 'powerful'. The agency of the supposed powerholders may also be constrained by the context in which they operate, with the result that the actions and reactions open to them may be limited (Gore 1990). An earlier study of mine, that of a parents' advice centre presented an example of this (Vincent 1993b). There I argued that educational professionals, even when placed in an apparent position of advocates, speaking on behalf of, and in support of, parents, were actually highly constrained in their actions by the norms and values of the professional roles and environments within which they work.

The final point concerns the notion that power can be 'given' to a marginalised social group in a straightforward process of transfer. Not only, as Michael Fielding argues, does this draw our attention to the 'susurrus of dependency' (1996, p.8) which forms the basis for the relationship between the 'empowerer' and the 'empowered', but it also ignores the complexities of active consent and acceptance. Apparently oppressed and 'powerless' groups may support the status quo, and accept existing hegemonic discourses which maintain and justify their marginalisation. An instance of this is what Iris Young (1990) refers to as the 'ideology of expertism' which reinforces the exclusive professional right to pronounce on matters within their sphere of expertise.

In an attempt to further elucidate the values and beliefs which underlie different uses of the term, I will now turn to the different political contexts in which the language of empowerment is deployed.

Social democratic understandings of empowerment

Social democratic notions of empowerment are often expressed in a seemingly radical or even emancipatory rhetoric which centres around the needs for increased participation in public sector institutions. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the absence of popular participation in such institutions, was explained in terms of the inequalities and disparities existing between the social locations of professionals and clients (Pateman 1970; Ward 1976). Similar critiques also appeared, but in a much diluted form, in policy reports of the time (MoH 1969; CACE 1967). They posited 'solutions' in terms of professionals 'giving' some of their power to their clients, a transaction assumed to ameliorate existing imbalances in power (Gore 1993).

In education, these concerns have translated into several types of initiative, all loosely connected by their professed desire to encourage parental involvement in schooling. One example is community education, a heterogeneous combination of ideologies and practices which sought to transform education, especially urban education, through an insistence on the inclusion of the local 'community' in the work of the school. Another is the terminology of 'parents as partners' which became increasingly common in the early 1980s, as teachers acknowledged parental contributions to their children's education. At broadly the same time, parental participation in the management of the school was mooted (Taylor Report 1977), although the idea received so little professional support that it was adopted by only a few localities until made mandatory by the 1986 Education Act. The 1988 Education Reform Act occasioned another form of parental participation in the education system by its devolution of a range of responsibilities, formerly held by Local Education Authorities (LEAs), to school-level. In response, many LEAs have established new consultative forums, not just with headteachers and school governors, but also with parents.

However, all these forms of involvement and participation are vulnerable to the criticism that their main aim is to legitimate existing institutional structures by co-opting parental support. Several commentators have applied this argument to mainstream community education. Such

schools laid a strong emphasis on establishing consensual values and beliefs concerning the goals of the school, and a concomitant feeling of ownership over the institution. However, this apparent unity was often only partial, incorporating only a small segment of the surrounding communities, and/or temporarily masking the retention of control by the school management (Fielding 1996; Vincent 1993a; Jeffs 1992; Baron 1988, 1989; Cowburn 1986). 'Partnership with parents', particularly when expressed in terms of curricula initiatives, has been the target for similar criticisms. Parental involvement in the curriculum is far more legitimate now than 20 or 30 years ago, but opportunities for parents, particularly working class parents (Reay 1996) to question teaching styles or methods remain highly limited (Vincent 1996; Brown 1993). Recent research into governing bodies suggests that close contact with the school and teachers means governors are far more likely to take up a position as somewhat uncritical supporters of the school (Deem, Brehony & Heath 1995). LEA 'consultative forums' are a more recent innovation, most having been established in the last two or three years. Such strategies when placed in the context of restricted financing for education tend to invite the suspicion that parents are being co-opted into the decision-making process to aid the acceptance of unpopular cuts (Vincent 1996)[2].

Thus social democratic understandings of 'empowerment' often fail to achieve any alterations in existing power relations, because they are too simplistic and imprecise to be able to address the complexities of power relations in late twentieth century societies. They represent a fusion of two different views of empowerment, what Michael Fielding (1996) refers to as the *emancipatory* and the *process* approaches[3]. Such notions of empowerment derive their impetus

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2. A parent member of a forum in inner London describes, in a recent interview, how the LEA struggled to manage the group and retain control of the agenda.

> It was an initiative from the council to try and involve parents more. It was quite brave, they're actually welcoming the idea of parents being more vociferous, because that would help to improve standards.....We've actually hit a crucial point because we have asked to circulate all schools with a petition on school meals. This has become the burning issue, not in fact achievement targets. But we've just had the message that it was 'inappropriate' for the officers who service our committee to circulate a petition which would of course be presented to the council, and so now we have to decide, without a budget, without our own secretary what to do.....I think the councillors in the borough thought [the forum] was a splendid mechanism to bring parents into school, and, you know, hear reading...Now it's turning into a campaign thing, and I think that's good. If you're talking about partnership - which they do at great length - you really have to listen to the other side of the partnership, because their concerns might not be what you think they ought to be, (mother).

3 Fielding describes the process view of empowerment as 'about those with power giving those whom they decide are appropriate receipients greater capacity to make decisions about

from an emphasis on 'powerless' groups coming together as a collectivity (as in the examples given earlier of community education and parents groups). However, beyond this little is clear. Thus the development of nascent groups is often heavily mediated by professionals, one way in which any emancipatory potential can be diluted. The rationale for social democratic strategies, such as parental involvement, or, another common example, adult education, may claim to be 'empowering', but such interventions are necessarily limited. They may be highly effective in helping individuals develop particular skills, which may in turn raise their self-confidence and esteem. This process might enable people to live more comfortably within their existing situations, but the structural constraints remain (O'Hagan 1991; Troyna 1994; John 1990). As Peters & Marshall argue (1991), concepts of empowerment, even when drawing on a critical or emancipatory position, are individualistic, concentrating on the empowerment of the autonomous self with little regard to social context. An example of this is provided by a recent paper documenting 'the empowerment of an urban parent', the story of a low-income mother who becomes involved in school decision-making processes and manages to develop her own voice arguing, against the context of frequent set-backs, for continued parent and community collaboration in school management (Etheridge et al 1995). This individual's sense of personal development is undoubtedly a success, but it is difficult to tell from the paper, to what, if any, extent, her experiences have altered the way the school interacts with the remainder of the parent body.

The frequent dilution of emancipatory rhetoric in practice means that there are few examples of projects which retain a more radical edge once implemented. Richard Hatcher argues that this is, at least partially, a result of the strength of the social democratic statist tradition in the UK (Hatcher 1995; also CCCS 1981). He turns to Australia for an adequate example, the Disadvantaged Schools Programme (DSP) which started in the mid 1970s, and enabled parents and teachers to bid for funding and make decisions over resource allocation and curriculum planning within their schools. The rationale for this project partly 'drew upon a language of social class and collective action. It sees the DSP as a strategy for collective social change rather than one which rescues individuals from poverty and equips them to be socially mobile,' (White & Johnstone 1993

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the nature of their work or greater involvement in their legitimate sphere of interest' (1996, p.2). By contrast, emancipatory accounts of empowerment emphasise the necessity of changing the structural context in which interactions take place. Social democratic approaches, as I've suggested earlier, often cause emancipatory rhetoric to be translated into initiatives that fall into Fielding's 'process' category.

p.113)[4] . In this way, the project attempted to redefine the local educational context and its constituent values, beliefs and structures (see also Connell 1993).

In contrast, the definitions of empowerment employed by the Conservative Party under Prime Ministers Thatcher and Major have caused the term to develop in a completely different direction. The right has re-articulated empowerment as an assertion of highly individual agency.

Conservative understandings of empowerment

In a recent article, Barry Troyna and I tried to highlight the process by which recent Conservative governments in the UK have succeeded in appropriating and re-articulating empowerment in the individualistic terms of consumer choice (Troyna & Vincent 1995; also Troyna 1994). The ease with which this has been accomplished and the current popularity of the word suggest the vagueness with which the left originally deployed this most elastic of terms.

'Empowerment' has had a visible role to play in the construction of John Major's personal political profile. Part of his appeal to the British electorate is generally supposed to be his 'man of the people' image, carefully fostered in his well-publicised liking for brown sauce and Happy Eaters restaurants, his concerns over traffic cones, and his penchant in the 1992 general election for delivering his message to 'the people' from a soapbox at a 'town meeting'. The concept of empowerment can be neatly tailored to reinforce the Prime Minister's determination to speak for 'the ordinary people', as is made explicit in this 1994 speech,

> Under the Citizen's Charter, public services now publish information on the performance of individual schools, hospitals and police forces. By the end of December, every local authority will have published information - in their local newspapers - about their performance on everything from response times to 999 calls, to the time it takes to process your planning application. This is a revolution that the grand may belittle. But it is one by which the ordinary family is empowered (Major 1994 p.11).

Information, however, does not equal participation. One may receive information passively with neither the desire, will, nor ability to be able to interpret or deploy

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[4]. Even in this case, however, the authors note that this formulation of disadvantage has been a consistent *undercurrent* within the project rather than a dominant discourse

it. Despite this, the Conservatives' treatment of parental involvement in education often blurs the difference between information and participation. This is evident in the Parents' Charter (DfE 1991, 1994) which defines participation with reference to parents' rights to receive an array of information from the school.

However, the right's understanding of empowerment is not limited to the receipt of information. Emphasis is also placed on the consumer actively choosing the services s/he requires. In the discourse of Conservative Governments under both Thatcher and Major, the 'language of choice has an overt political role' (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe 1995 p.21). Charlie Leadbeater commented on this phenomenon at the end of the 1980s.

> It has asserted the possibility of individuals becoming agents to change their worlds through private initiatives. Aspirations for autonomy, choice, decentralisation, greater responsibility which were met with mumbling paternalism by the post-war social democratic state have been met by Thatcherite encouragement in the 1980s (Leadbeater 1989, p.142)

Indeed, the opportunity and process of choosing is portrayed as empowering. The Prime Minister again,

> This, then, must be the next phase of Conservatism, to shift the balance of choice in society more radically than ever before, into the hands of ordinary people. The power to choose should be the birthright of every citizen (Major, 1992, p.5).

In this way, the notion of empowerment is rendered unproblematic. To empower someone is a relatively straightforward process involving giving them information and offering opportunities to use that information to make choices between competing products. The guise of classlessness and neutrality seek to deflect attention from the inconvenient arguments that access to choice in terms of the ability to exploit choice opportunities (laying aside for the moment the question of how real those opportunities are) is distributed unequally through society and is largely constructed by individual possession of particular social, cultural and financial resources.

'Self-help': the 'new centrist' path to empowerment

To reiterate: social democratic understandings of empowerment are rooted in the political and cultural contexts of the late 1960s and 1970s (eg. community education, the Skeffington Report on urban planning, the Maud Commission on local government, and the Community Development Projects all in England; the DSP in Australia, community activism around education in Canada, Levin 1987; Dehli with Januario 1994). At that time, empowerment was part of a 'discourse of collective injustice and claims for equality and recognition'. The 'solution' was perceived to lie with the revitalisation of the public sphere (Delhi 1995 p.9)

Contexts change though, and one fundamental alteration has been the energetic incursion of new right agendas in many western countries. The foregrounding of the individual and consumer sovereignty in new right policies have left an apparently indelible mark upon the language of the left. The emerging terminology is that of self-empowerment and individual responsibility. This neatly shifts the emphasis away from disabling social structures and organisations, laying the responsibility for change onto individuals. It is an approach deployed by of what I will call (for want of a better term) the 'new centrists' A particularly vivid example is presented by Amitai Etzioni, the communitarian writer whose work is said to have influenced both President Clinton and Tony Blair, leader of the British Labour Party. In *Spirit of the Community* (1993), Etzioni sees parent participation in education as an indicator of and contributor to more general participation in public life. Empowering parents, he says, is a way of 'building community' (1993, p.142). His key to the regeneration of 'community' is an insistence on personal responsibility and self-help, first and foremost in the case of each individual, and second, with regard to 'the community' as a whole. Etzioni argues that this patchwork of interacting, but distinct communities will derive their coherence from shared 'American values'. These he defines as a 'commitment to democracy, individual rights and mutual respect' all of which are apparently lacking in 'other major cultural traditions' (p.159). Thus communitarianism sanctifies individual empowerment. Communitarian views of 'empowerment' acknowledge existing structural inequalities, but these are subordinated to the clarion call of individual responsibility, a kind of self-empowerment that calls for grit, determination and commitment to American values, all simpler remedies than those required to address entrenched racism, sexism or poverty.

In a rather different context, that of British education policy, similar sentiments prevail. The Labour Party's stance on parental participation reveals a similar adherence to individual empowerment. *Opening Doors to a Learning*

Society (1994) states that 'it is crucial that we understand the importance of [the home-school] partnership on individual and collective levels' (p.11). Yet the examples given of collective involvement are marked by a certain caution. The policy document proposes the establishment of home-school associations and a commitment to *consult* on the establishing of community education forums (parents' forums in *Diversity and Excellence,* 1995). Furthermore, home-school associations are 'to operate as a two-way channel for the exchange of information between teachers and parents' rather than as a mechanism by which parents can have an input into the school's decision-making processes. The commitment to these associations is, in any case, set amongst proposals on home-school contracts and homework, ways in which individual parents can help further their children's progress and offer support to the school. Therefore, the Labour Party's proposals on parents retain the language of collective participation, but it is subordinated to the practice of individual parental involvement. Again, exhortations to parents to recognise individual responsibilities and obligations offer politicians a more straightforward strategy than the unpredictable and radical changes involved in encouraging collective citizen participation in education.

To sum up, empowerment implies redistributing control away from bureaucracies and vested professional interests, towards, (in social democratic readings), the disadvantaged and deprived, and, (in Conservative readings), towards consumers. However, a closer focus is required. Conservative 'readings' of the concept of empowerment focus on the individual consumer's right to choose the education s/he prefers for a child, unfettered by the rules and regulations imposed by producers. However, consumer empowerment offers parents apparently improved rights of 'entry' and 'exit' from a school[5], but only limited opportunities to participate in the everyday running of the institution. In contrast, current social democratic definitions of empowerment (appear to) emphasise the provision of opportunities for citizen involvement, consultation and participation in the delivery of local education services.

The right's approaches to empowerment are frequently criticised for not addressing the impact of structural inequalities which prevent many groups from accessing choice initiatives. Traditionally, social democratic policies *do* allude to such barriers, and suggest, at least in theory, the possibility of 'empowering' excluded *groups*, such as some groups of working class or ethnic minority

[5] In popular, over-subscribed schools, of course, selection has re-established the means by which producer can choose their intake (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe 1995)

parents. However, social democratic policies operate at the surface of these issues, developing strategies which, in effect, bring a few previously excluded *individuals* into the decision-making process. Furthermore, the new centrist understandings of empowerment which currently feature in political rhetoric in the UK and USA acknowledge the powerful individualistic discourses given enhanced legitimacy by the new right. Consequently, a concern with empowering groups scarcely features.

In the second section of this paper, I wish to argue that none of these conceptions of empowerment are sufficiently sophisticated to address the lived realities of disenfranchised groups of parents. In support, I will draw on a series of events (and non-events) that occurred during a period of teacher shortage at an inner London primary school.

Parent power? The case of Low Road Primary School

This case study is part of a larger, recently-completed study into parent-teacher relationships in an area I have called 'City', an economically-deprived part of London. The particular school, Low Road, is one of five primary (elementary) schools that figured in the research. Two of those schools, of which Low Rd was one, were the subject of in-depth study.

The approach adopted was a qualitative one, since this gave the most effective access to those issues at the centre of the study, namely the perspectives of parents and teachers, their interactions with one other, and how parents viewed particular aspects of the school organisation. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, but observation and document analysis were also employed. The school is large, having over 400 pupils aged between 3 and 11. It has, when fully staffed, 20 teachers. Fifty parents (40 women, 10 men) and sixteen teachers (11 women, 5 men) were interviewed for this part of the study. The school had a majority of white working class families, but was racially mixed, and included sizeable African/Caribbean and South Asian minorities. Parents from all the major ethnic groups at the school took part in the research.

Low Rd suffered from severe teacher shortages during the school years 1989-90 and 1990-1[6]. During 1989-90, several classes were disrupted by a constant

[6]. Teacher shortage was a problem throughout London at this time, but the shortage was particularly severe throughout Low Rd's LEA , and acute at Low Rd itself and a few of its neighbouring schools.

stream of supply teachers[7]. In September 1990, the school started the year five class teachers short, and the head was in the invidious position of having to warn parents concerned that their children would not be able to return to school unless a teacher was found. While I was conducting fieldwork at the school, a class of 5-6 year olds (Year one) were out of school for two months during the Autumn term 1990. All the parents who took part in the study either had or knew of children who had been affected by the shortage. All commented on the adverse effects of being off school on children's progress and motivation, (especially for children who were experiencing learning difficulties) and the problems of child-care it caused to parents in paid work. In addition, it was recognised that such a high teacher turn-over militated against the development of positive relationships between either parents or children and the teachers.

Responses

Thus the teacher-shortage was universally acknowledged to be serious, and such a consensus is generally considered to be a pre-requisite for grass-roots action (Dahl 1961; Thomas 1986). One might expect therefore that the situation was grave enough to stimulate the emergence of some type of parent pressure-group that campaigned locally to secure educational resources for their children. Yet no concerted collective action was taken.

Some parents responded individually to the situation. Six parent-respondents (out of 50), including one parent-governor, spoke of writing to or ringing the local education authority (LEA). Just three of this six attended a public meeting organised in the borough by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) to address the problems of teacher shortage. By the time the Year one class returned to school 'a staggering two months' after the children were originally sent home ('City' Gazette, 7.12.90), six pupils had transferred to other schools.

A limited form of collective action was taken by one small group of parents whose children attended the school's special needs unit (which was semi-detached from the school, and staffed on a different basis, but also badly affected by teacher shortage). Two mothers finally invited the local paper to cover the story of teacher shortage.

In an effort to try and understand parental reaction to the teacher shortage, I asked individuals for their explanations as to why there was a problem. Most parents commented that they did not really know, and then offered reasons they had gleaned from media coverage of the situation. Central

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7. 'They had one called Mr Rush - he only stayed two days!' (mother)

government was blamed twenty two times, with parents often mentioning the low levels of pay which made the job unattractive, and living in London difficult. The incompetence of the local council and education authority was mentioned eleven times. Eleven parents could give no reasons at all, and smaller numbers mentioned expensive housing and the negative image of the borough's schools.

From this and other data drawn from my interviews with parents, I offer this tentative analysis of the Low Rd parents' non-participation in the issue of teacher shortage. It analyses their position on a number of different levels and dimensions, which combine to make certain forms of action appear unviable. These levels are not discrete areas for analysis, but share a dialectical relationship. The key to this analysis is parental perceptions of their agency, their capability to 'make a difference' (Giddens 1984).

Perceptions of agency are strongly influenced by hegemonic discourses; what Henry Giroux called, 'regimes of common sense'. The workings out of these 'regimes' can give rise to 'oppression in the soft sense'. By this, Giroux is referring to sites of struggle that are less visible, less clearly defined than 'hard' oppression (i.e. overt cases of injustice and abuse). He continues,

> As Antonio Gramsci has pointed out, people often find themselves positioned within forms of knowledge, institutional structures and social relationships that have a "creeping or quiet" kind of hegemony about them. The forms of domination they produce or sustain are not so obvious, not so clear. For instance, dominant groups often invite people to deskill themselves, by promoting what might be called regimes of common sense; in this case people are presented with narratives about their lives, society and the larger world that naturalise events in order to make it appear as if particular forms of inequality and other social justices are natural, given or endemic to questions of individual character, (1994, p.157)[8].

Kari Dehli argues that '"parents" are positioned differently in relation to schooling, and they draw on and construct different "cultural scripts" to constitute their identities and community memberships to make claims on schools,' (1995 p.16).

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[8]. Some of Giroux's terms do require closer examination. The idea of people being 'presented with narratives about their lives' suggests passiveness and a false consciousness on the part of the receipients which underplays the role of active consent. He also suggests that this process of 'presentation' is a fairly systematic and complete one, whereas Gramsci stresses the fragmentary and contradictory nature of common sense constructs, which allows 'cultural authority' (Fraser 1992) to be negotiated and contested.

In the case of Low Rd, there were a number of common sense perceptions drawn from parents' 'cultural scripts' that influenced their belief that agency, their capacity to act effectively in this situation was limited. The most pervasive were perceptions of exclusion from multiple social and political sites.

It is a common criticism of liberal democratic societies based on representative democracy that their operation militates against a sense of pro-active citizenship, generating instead a perception amongst citizens that individual actions are of little consequence (Pateman 1970; Miliband 1984). The political process itself is seen as one that is self-contained, distant and alien from people's day to day lives.

> People become disillusioned with 'politics' because key areas of social life...no longer correspond to any accessible domains of political authority (Giddens 1994 p.116)

However, if this broadly general experience of exclusion is common to many social groups, any attempts to look deeper than this require a realisation of the differing nuances and emphases in parental perceptions and experiences which result from 'the contradictory intersection of voices constituted by gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ideology etc.' (Ellsworth 1988, p.9). Here, I attempt to tease out the influences of just three dimensions: ethnicity, gender and social class.

Ethnicity: Bangladeshi parents

I take as an example here the experiences of Bangladeshi parents at Low Rd. (although their experiences of exclusion and alienation from the school were shared by other ethnic groups, see Vincent 1996). A small group of white parents and children at Low Rd School displayed overt racism towards children and adults of Bangladeshi-origin, and the area in which the school is located has a reputation for spasmodic outbursts of racist harassment and violence. Yet the school did little to either mitigate such behaviour on the part of the children, or clearly publicise a non-racist stance to parents. I have argued elsewhere that this situation was compounded by the school's neglect of the experiences and concerns of Bangladeshi parents. Those who participated in the study felt very strongly that the school's ethos was shaped by teachers with whom they shared no common ground, be it in terms of ethnicity, social class, language or religious beliefs (see Vincent 1996). As a result, they felt there were few possibilities for

them to engage with the school, whilst the local education authority was perceived as even more distant.

Gender: Mothers

The majority of the 'parents' I spoke to were women, as it is overwhelmingly women who bear the major responsibility for the success or otherwise of the education of their young children (Griffith & Smith 1987; David et al 1993). However, bringing up children is constructed as a private activity, albeit one that attracts a high degree of state intervention. Traditionally, 'motherhood' does not include taking struggles on behalf of one's children out into the public sphere. As Carole Pateman notes,

> Women were held by nature to lack the characteristics required for participation in political life, and citizenship has been constructed in the male image. Women, our bodies and our distinctive capacities represented all that citizenship and equality are not.....But this [exclusion] is only part of the story of the development of modern patriarchy....Women were incorporated differently from men, the 'individuals' and 'citizens' of political theory....They were incorporated as men's subordinates into their own private sphere, and so were excluded from 'civil society' in the sense of the public sphere of the economy and citizenship of the state, (Pateman 1992 p.19)

Pateman later comments that much of women's political activity does derive from issues heavily bound up with motherhood, but nonetheless, having to make such a forced incursion into the sphere of public activity presented another barrier for the women in the Low Rd locality.

Class: Working class parents

Many of the working class parents of Low Rd, who took part in this project, testified to their experience of, and a certain acceptance of, exclusion from the operation of various forms of social welfare provision, including education. The population in the Low Rd locality was subject to multiple deprivation, so some families were undoubtedly living under a degree of financial and emotional stress that made any form of participation or involvement a low priority.

The majority of Low Rd's parent body were placed in what Donzelot refers to as a tutelage relationship with the welfare state. Anna Yeatman summarises Donzelot's arguments in the following terms,

> If you are not able to establish a market based independence you can get access to subsidised or public housing, various forms of income support, public health and other services. But not on the condition of your choosing. Instead you are placed under the tutelage of state officials and state-sponsored professional service delivers, who determine whether you fit the criteria for eligibility for state support, what your real needs are, and how and whether they are to be fulfilled, (1994 p.77; Donzelot 1979 p.xxi, pp.89-93)

Low Rd's headteacher had attempted to strengthen the school's links with social services, the council's housing department, police and health services. This was justified by the school's need to know what was going on in other areas of families' lives in order to understand conflicts and tensions that might surface at school. This approach is common in areas of economic deprivation, the rationale being that the school should not appear remote from other concerns in everyday life, nor blind to outside influences affecting the children's enthusiasm and willingness to learn. However, this type of contact with other agencies operates over the heads of the local families (see also Baron 1989). The school appears to form part of a 'wall' made up of the 'caring professions', backed up by the police and designed to 'manage' the local population. The families themselves remain 'cases' or 'clients', having little or no influence upon the institutions. The amount of blank walls some parents met with in an attempt to run their lives was guaranteed to produced a severe sense of frustration and cynicism. Ironically the media coverage of the capital's teacher shortage appeared to further substantiate this view. By presenting the shortage as an city-wide problem (which it was), it reinforced people's feelings that the local situation was caused by forces quite beyond their influence.

However, there were instances of collective grass-roots activism in the Low Rd locality. To take just two examples; first, the housing estate nearest the school had an active tenants' association who were at the time, planning the development of a playground. Second, the death of a child in a road accident had spurred two women (with the support of a local councillor) to spearhead a successful campaign to get speed bumps installed in the road. Yet, the same women were much more wary of becoming involved with Low Rd, their children's school.

Professionalism

In order to consider this further, it is necessary to focus on the character of educational institutions. Parental wariness is unsurprising given that, as noted earlier, the dominant model of parental involvement in education allocates a role to parents as supporters and learners in their relationships with professionals. Thus individual parental involvement in relation to their own child's learning, and involvement in whole-school aspects as a fund-raiser and an audience are all sanctioned. More participative roles for parents especially for groups of parents are much rarer and attract professional dissent. Thus teachers clearly and routinely send out messages that involvement beyond the role of supporter/learner is not appropriate for parents. Parent-respondents at Low Rd and the other case study schools made frequent references to their perceptions that they were politely patronised by the teachers, and kept at a distance. Many also had an acute sense that they themselves lacked the knowledge to 'interfere' with their children's education (see Vincent 1996 for examples). Low Rd School appeared as a particularly distant institution. Although there were instances of positive relationships between individual teachers and parents, home-school relations in general were marked by a lack of contact, mutual confusion, and, in a few cases, overt hostility. The school had suffered from its unstable staffing, and survival in terms of getting through the day was the staff's main priority. Therefore there was little regular teacher-parent interaction that was not connected to a child's behaviour. This meant there were no regular parents evenings, no PTAs, no forum in other words for parents and teachers to meet or parents to meet each other. The school (neither staff nor governors) did not elicit parental aid in resolving the teacher shortage situation, although the head did deflect complaints by telling parents to write to the LEA.

The result of all this was that parents felt highly *dis*empowered in the face of the teacher shortage.

> It's very frustrating, but you can't do anything. It's not just you, if you're in a class of 30, you're just one of 30 parents going through the same traumas (mother)

> We were upset, so was she [the headteacher]. It was something we didn't have any control over....I was going out of my mind wondering how long it would be, (mother)

Even those few parents who had taken action were disappointed by the lack of results. One of these women described her efforts to get her son back into school:

> I had a right go at the education office when he was off school all that time. I was on the 'phone every five minutes and all that happened was that I was passed from one to another. I never spoke to the same person twice. I went to that [NUT] meeting at the Town Hall. I couldn't get [the councillor] to answer my question....[The audience] kept shouting, 'answer this lady's question', and he kept changing the subject. No-one wants to know. When it comes down to it, they don't care, (mother, Low Road)

Exceptions

The prevailing political discourse concerning parents interactions with schools - consumerism - did seem to offer an alternative course of action for a few. The government's championing of parental choice results in a situation in which the 'correct' response to instances of parental dissatisfaction with the school is 'exit'. As noted earlier, a few parents did choose this route. However as research on parental choice demonstrates, the ability to access choice is mediated by families' social class position (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe 1995). Therefore, for many Low Rd parents the idea of acting as a consumer of education on their children's behalf had little meaning or relevance.

That the special needs unit was an exception to the general absence of action also requires some further comment. The nature of the children's learning difficulties and the attitudes of the unit's teachers meant that these parents were the only ones offered opportunities for frequent and regular contact with the school. Therefore, this group of parents were more cohesive than any of the year groups. In addition, the two women who liaised with the local journalist were more confident in that public role than many others felt themselves to be.

In conclusion, Anna Yeatman's definition of the term emancipation (note, she does not use the term empowerment) is interesting. It is 'to do with human beings' understanding themselves to be in some kind of autonomous relationship to their capacity for agency' (1994 p.6). For Low Road parents however, this capacity, this capability for agency was heavily circumscribed by a multiplicity of forces, attitudes and relationships just outlined.

Conclusion

The analysis illustrates the kinds of participation and empowerment promoted by social democratic, Conservative and 'new centrist' discourses, and argues that none have the ability to alter the position and perceptions of powerlessness shared by a group of working class parents. Simplistic definitions of parental empowerment fail to acknowledge that 'relations between families and school..[are] organised and negotiated through hierarchies of power, structured by gender, race, cultural, religion and class differences,' (Dehli & Januario 1994 p.17). Neither form of political discourse defines 'empowerment' in a way that emphasises collective action. On the contrary, existing understandings ensure that individual parental involvement is the main route through which parents access the education system. In this way, they serve to limit and constrain parental agency. Therefore the position, beliefs and attitudes of many parents remain untouched by the rhetoric of parental empowerment, and their participation in the education of their children will remain minimal. Such rhetoric will not encourage parental participation if it ignores or only superficially alludes to the experiences of poverty, exclusion, professional domination, sexism and racism. As Stuart Hall comments, 'the nature of power in the modern world is that it is constructed [in addition to the economic] in relation to political, moral, intellectual, cultural, ideological and sexual questions,' (Hall 1988 p.170). This suggests we need to think about initiatives in parental participation in a way that transcends narrow political and rhetorical constructs, and instead roots participation in peoples' immediate experiences and realities.

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